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ABSTRACT

This study compared the perceptions of personal and ideal gender roles, and the fit between an individual's personal and ideal gender roles. Participating were 108 female and 61 male students (ages ranged from 17 to 56) enrolled in undergraduate psychology classes at a Midwestern university and at a community college. For comparison purposes, participants from single-parent and intact families were paired on gender, age, race, and socioeconomic status, resulting in 32 female and 13 male pairs. There were 30 Caucasian, 12 African-American, and 3 Asian-American pairs. Participants completed two forms of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory, describing their own and ideal gender roles. Findings indicated that males in mother-headed single-parent families were more likely to report a masculine personal gender role than males in intact families. Females in two-parent families were more likely to describe themselves as androgynous than females in mother-headed single-parent families. Individuals reared in mother-headed single-parent families did not hold more androgynous ideal gender role beliefs than individuals from intact families. Males were more likely to describe themselves in terms of traditionally masculine characteristics than to describe the ideal person this way. Females in mother-headed single-parent families were more likely to describe the ideal person as androgynous than to describe themselves this way. Six of the 8 subjects raised in father-headed single-parent families described the ideal person as androgynous. Most of the females in this group described themselves using traditional feminine characteristics. (KB)

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# Gender Role Differences in Students of Single-Parent and Intact Families

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## Gender Roles

Gender roles are beliefs about the ways in which individual, familial, community, and societal roles are divided by gender. The current study will explore three specifics of gender roles:

- the person's perceptions of their own gender roles (personal gender roles),
- the person's perceptions of socially idealized gender roles (ideal gender roles), and
- the fit between an individual's personal and ideal gender roles.

## Gender Roles in Single-Parent versus Intact Families

Gender differences between children reared in single-parent versus intact families are believed to exist due to:

- Mothers who used to be primary caregivers are busy with professional careers, and fathers who used to be at their jobs may be found at home more often (Amato & Booth, 1991; Katz, 1989).
- The flexibility of roles present in growing up with one primary parent may lead children to disregard sex-typed roles that are generally seen by society as being acceptable.
- Children reared in single-parent homes will have experiences that do not match those valued by our society (e.g. - sex typed, stereotyped interactions).
- Children from intact families are more apt to have the same personal and ideal roles because their family experience will match experiences valued by our society.

In the current study, six specific questions were asked of gender roles and the structure of the family:

1. Do students reared in mother-headed single-parent families hold different personal gender role beliefs that students reared in intact families?
2. Do students reared in mother-headed single-parent families hold different ideal gender role beliefs that students reared in intact families?
3. Are students reared in mother-headed single-parent families more similar on personal and ideal gender roles than individuals reared in intact families?
4. Do students reared in father-headed single-parent families hold different personal gender role beliefs that students reared in intact families?
5. Do students reared in father-headed single-parent families hold different ideal gender role beliefs that students reared in intact families?
6. Are students reared in father-headed single-parent families more similar on personal and ideal gender roles than individuals reared in intact families?

## Method

### Participants

- 108 female and 61 male students enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses at a university and a community college in the Midwest.
- Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 56, with the median falling at 19 years.
- Participants were asked to define their families based on their family of origin.

Of the 169 students sampled in this study:

- 108 were from intact families
- 59 were from single-parent families
- Two subjects did not define their family status, and were removed from further analysis.
- median income of $34,000.

### Subjects Paired Based on Gender, Age, Race, SES

In order to assure that differences in gender roles between participants from single-parent families and intact families were not confounded by other variables, participants in single-parent and intact families were paired based on gender, age, race, and socieo-economic status (see Table 1).

45 pairs resulted

- 32 female pairs and 13 male pairs
- 30 Caucasian pairs, 12 African-American pairs and 3 Asian-American pairs

Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages for Pairs of Participants' Gender, Family Status, Ethnicity, and Age

| Gender | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Female | 32 | 71 |
| Male | 13 | 29 |
| TOTAL | 45 Pairs | 100 |

| Race | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Caucasian | 30 | 66 |
| African-American | 12 | 26 |
| Asian-American | 3 | 6 |
| TOTAL | 45 Pairs | 100 |

| Age | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| College-Aged | 38 | 84 |
| Post-College Aged | 7 | 16 |
| TOTAL | 45 Pairs | 100 |

| Income | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Lower Income | 13 | 29 |
| Middle Income | 11 | 24 |
| Upper Income | 21 | 47 |
| TOTAL | 45 Pairs | 100 |

Procedure and Measures

Personal Gender Roles.
Participants were asked to complete two forms of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory.

- Personal gender roles - assess how the individual describes their own gender roles

3 scales:

- Masculinity scale - 20 items - ambitious, self-reliant, independent, assertive.
- Femininity scale - 20 items - affectionate, gentle, understanding, sensitive to the needs of others.
- Gender Neutral items - 20 items

Internal Consistency:

- Personal masculinity scale - .84.
- Personal femininity scale - .87.

A total score was created by adding the femininity and masculinity scales (FM scale). High scores indicate androgynous characteristics.

Ideal gender roles.
Participants were also asked to complete a modified form of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory.

- Ideal gender roles - assess how the individual describes the ideal person's gender roles.

3 scales:

- Ideal Masculinity scale - 20 items - ambitious, self-reliant, independent, assertive.
- Ideal Femininity scale - 20 items - affectionate, gentle, understanding, sensitive to the needs of others.
- Gender neutral items - 20 items

Internal Consistency:

- Ideal masculinity scale - .89.
- Ideal femininity scale - .84.

A total score was created by adding the femininity and masculinity scales (Ideal FM scale). High scores indicate androgynous characteristics.

## Results

Students Raised in Mother-Headed Single-Parent Families

Differences in personal gender roles between individuals reared in mother-headed single-parent versus intact two-parent families

- Males in mother-headed single-parent families were more likely to report a masculine personal gender role than males in intact two parent families ( $t$ (22) = 2.76, $p$ = .01) (see Table 1).
- Females in one-parent mother-headed families were more likely to report a masculine personal gender role than females in two-parent intact families ( t (48) = 4.34, p =.00).
- Females in two-parent families were more likely to describe themselves as androgynous than females in mother-headed one-parent families ( $t$ (48) = -3.45, $p$ = .00) (see Table 1).

Differences in ideal gender roles between individuals reared in mother-headed single-parent versus intact two-parent families

Individuals reared in mother-headed single-parent families did not hold more androgynous ideal gender role beliefs than individuals reared in intact families (see Table 1).

Differences between personal and ideal roles between males reared in mother-headed single-parent versus intact two-parent families

- There was a significant difference between the personal and ideal gender roles for the masculine category for males examined ( $t$ (11) = 3.92, $p$ = .00).
- Males were more likely to describe themselves in terms of traditionally masculine characteristics than to describe the ideal person this way (described as androgynous) ( $t$ (11) = -3.92, $p$ = .00).

Differences between personal and ideal roles between females reared in mother-headed single-parent versus intact two-parent families

- Females in mother-headed single-parent families were more likely to describe themselves in terms of masculine characteristics than to describe themselves this way ( $t$ (24) = 2.82, $p$ =.01).
- Instead, they were more likely to describe the ideal person in terms of both masculine and feminine characteristics (androgynous) than to describe themselves this way ( $t$ (24) = -3.98, $p$ = .00).

Students Raised in Father-Headed Single-Parent Families

- Only eight subjects (seven females and one male) in the current sample were raised in father-headed single-parent families.
- Like children raised in mother-headed single-parent and two –parent families, most subjects raised in father-headed single-parent families (6 out of 8 subjects) described the ideal person as androgynous.
- However, unlike the subjects raised in mother-headed single-parent or two-parent families, most of the females raised in father-headed single-parent families (5 out of 7 females) described themselves using traditional feminine characteristics.
- Small sample suggests that the effects of being raised in father-headed single-parent families versus a single-parent mother may be different.

**Discussion**

- Found differences in personal gender roles between individuals raised in one-parent versus two parent-families.
- Although earlier studies (Kurdek & Siesky, 1980) found that individuals in one-parent families are more likely to be androgynous than individuals in two-parent families, these studies did not control for the possible effects of gender, age, race, and income.
- However, the small sample size that resulted from the matching procedure reduced the power of the statistical analyses, making it difficult to find significance.

Further Research

- Important to use ideal scales.
- Further examination of differences that exist between individuals reared in single-parent father-headed families.
- Further studies should be performed to identify the relations between a child's personal gender roles and those gender roles modeled in the home.
- Use of observational methodologies in identifying the parents' behaviors and roles within family interactions.

The current study explored three specifics of gender roles: the person's perceptions of their own gender roles (personal gender roles), the person's perceptions of socially idealized gender roles (ideal gender roles), and the fit between an individual's personal and ideal gender roles. In order to assure that differences in gender roles between participants from single-parent families and intact families were not confounded by other variables, participants in single-parent and intact families were paired based on gender, age, race, and socieo-economic status.

The current study found differences in personal gender roles between individuals raised in one-parent versus two parent-families. Although earlier studies (Kurdek & Siesky, 1980) found that individuals in one-parent families are more likely to be androgynous than individuals in two-parent families, this study found that children reared in one-parent families were more likely to hold masculine gender roles.

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